

# Sharing A Treasure



By MADELINE HILDRETH, Management Forester, Alabama Forestry Commission, Brewton

**“W**elcome to Booker’s Mill,” Don Stinson proudly announces to over one hundred first graders. The alert children listen intently as Mr. Stinson gives them a brief history of the property. The wriggling students appear interested as he explains that the old country store used to be the hub of the community, along with a gristmill. They anticipate seeing the bottomland hardwoods, flowering rhododendron, a log cabin and Indians! All of this is on the Stinson’s 215-acre TREASURE Forest.

Following their guide’s directions, the children begin the adventure. The first stop is a true Indian teepee. The Stinson’s erected the teepee years ago. They began with a homemade teepee and later replaced it with a huge Indian teepee. It is left up year-round, much to the delight of passersby’s. This particular morning the Poarch Band of Creek Indians explain how Native Americans, as well as others, used the teepee.

Next, the kids tromp down the nature trail. The trail winds along the banks of the lake. They are instructed to use all



*Don and Grace Stinson*

senses, except tasting. The students stop to feel soft moss growing on a bank, they smell honeysuckle and rhododendrons which form a pink wall along the edge of the trail. A decaying log and sweet gum balls are observed. In the quiet of a hardwood bottom they hear

birds sing, water rushing and the wind blowing. The children walk slowly and quietly across two bridges, carefully noting the water bugs and the stream flowing through the roots of an old tree. After a strenuous walk up a steep hill, the students learn more about forestry by playing games.

A hayride offers an opportunity to see the property. The guide points out a tiny cabin at the top of a steep hill. This is the first cabin the Stinson’s built. Later they see an odd clump of briars. Imagine their surprise when an ugly troll pops out! The hayride passes swimming holes and streams, swamps and fields.

After the hayride, the kids rush to the log cabin. The cabin was bought and rebuilt on-site and was originally the kitchen of a larger home. Mrs. Stinson and her sister explain how the cabin was used in the 1800s. The children wander from the cabin to the stage area. Comfortably sitting on benches, they watch with wonder as birds, snakes and other native animals are exhibited and discussed. A picnic lunch on the grassy knoll above the pond follows. After a





*The old mill wheel still stands.*

visit from Smokey Bear and other characters, the tired students return to school.

Each year the Stinson's devote one full week to student field days. For the past 5 years, Escambia County first graders have traveled to Booker's Mill. As retired educators, the Stinson's believe in using their property for educational purposes. While a number of agency personnel, including Alabama Forestry Commission associates, participate in the event, the Stinson's are involved in every part of the project. Mrs. Stinson's sister and cousin often come just to help. This group is one of many that visit Booker's Mill and Stinson Springs each year. They

have also hosted teacher's workshops and landowner groups.

The Stinson's did not intentionally plan to host so many events and visitors. It just happened. Don and Grace Stinson worked in the Pensacola, Florida school system for many years. They always enjoyed their beach house retreat until it became more of a burden than a place to rest. Don's father, a Methodist minister, began looking for a place to retire. He wanted a place in the country, near his old home. Although the elder Mr. Stinson died before he purchased any property, Don and Grace continued to look for a country retreat. A co-worker told Mr. Stinson about some property for sale in rural Conecuh County. It was love at first sight! To some, the property might be considered worthless swamp-land. The Stinson's, however, saw the perfect backdrop for their rustic retreat.

Their plan was simple - take it one step at a time. The property had been neglected for years, leaving quite a bit of work to be done. Clearing the knoll was the first step; the next step was a cabin atop the hill. Although Conecuh County does not typically have steep terrain, above the creek is very steep. The cabin is perched high above the massive oaks in the bottomland. Grace and Don Stinson built the cabin with no formal construction training. They wanted a very rustic, secluded retreat, and it is both. Since there was no road leading to the cabin site, building materials were carried up the steep trail on Mr. Stinson's shoulders. He confesses to having a special appreciation for the

pyramid builders. Below the cabin are 13 springs. The main spring was renamed Stinson Springs. The springs provide wonderful swimming holes, as well as water for wildlife.

The Stinson's were so proud of their completed cabin that they invited many friends and co-workers to visit. Sharing the property was never a question; it was just what they did. When two adjoining parcels were sold, the Stinson's were delighted to be able to purchase them. They were especially pleased when they became owners of an old country store. Although dilapidated, the store was restored and the grounds cleared and landscaped. The old 1880s dam near the store required extensive repairs. Since both the dam and store are visible from the nearby country road, visitors dropped by much more frequently. The store retains the name of its previous owners, Booker's Mill. The Stinson's briefly considered renaming it, but decided history should be preserved.

The new acreage allowed the Stinson's to add new structures to the property. An old log cabin from the Stinson's family was dismantled and rebuilt on the property. The cabin, originally built in 1887, was put together with pegs. Hack marks numbered the logs making rebuilding simpler. After this project was complete, a new log cabin was erected from cedar logs off the property. Later, additional cabins were added to comfortably house

*A nature trail winds through bottomland hardwoods.*







*Beautiful wildflowers grace this grassy opening.*

family members. A covered stage and a barbecue area are perfect for entertaining large groups. Mrs. Stinson smiles when discussing their projects, "We'll never be finished. Don is always looking for the next project." Since they have done most of the work themselves, their projects keep getting more detailed and elaborate.

The Stinson's have been working with the Alabama Forestry Commission since 1979. Since most of the original land was bottomland hardwood, little management was required until Hurricane Opal ripped through. Damaged trees were removed, and the areas have naturally regenerated. As they acquired open areas, pines were planted and food plots created and maintained. Every year, a few more acres of pines are planted. One small stand of pines is on a regular burning rotation.

When asked about food plots, Mr. Stinson listed chufa, sorghum and peas as species planted. "The peas," laughed Mrs. Stinson, "were originally for us, but the deer won!"

Good stewardship is important to the Stinson's. They have passed these ideals on to their family. Their daughters, Sharon and Gina, are very involved in the property's management. The grandchildren love to visit the TREASURE Forest and help with the projects. All the extended family contributes to events.

The fourth Sunday in October highlights the family's commitment to Stinson Springs, as over 500 family

members gather for the annual reunion. Since 1983, hayrides, skydivers, cloggers, and singers have all been part of the entertainment at Booker's Mill.

In addition to school programs and family reunions, the property has also been the site of several weddings. The first couple wed on the property many years ago and honeymooned in the rustic cabin. Scout groups often camp on the property. Church groups and senior citizens have also been guests.

According to Mr. Stinson, different groups make different requests. Once a

senior citizen's group requested entertainment! Always one to please, Mr. Stinson located a talented musician in Evergreen willing to play and sing for the group. Visitors from France, South Africa, Portugal and Holland have toured the Stinson property. Often interesting people just appear. The site is listed in the state tour guide as having a gristmill. Visitors may initially be disappointed not to find a working mill, only the site of an old gristmill. But after a few minutes, the disappointment fades as they fall under the spell of the natural beauty of the property.

The many visitors might be unsettling to some, but the Stinson's thrive on being able to share their retreat. "It reaffirms your faith in mankind," says Mr. Stinson. "I can't remember one negative experience."

TREASURE Forest landowners since 1990, Don and Grace Stinson are avid supporters of the program. Don is chairman of the local Alabama TREASURE Forest Association chapter and will be state chairman next year. They have been involved in many groups supporting their values and beliefs, but find that TREASURE Forest represents all the facets they support - education, stewardship, mentoring and God.

Grace and Don Stinson are proud of their TREASURE Forest and continue to share the fruits of their labor. If you're ever in Conecuh County, stop by and look around. Just remember that this TREASURE Forest is a work in progress. 🌲



*This pond is one of many water sources on the property.*